

CHAPTER THREE

BATTLE AT FORT UTAH

The redman threw the buffalo skin in the path of the oncoming Mormon pioneers to indicate that they should come to a halt. This was the Ute custom when demanding a tribute or permission to pass through Indian territory.

The oncoming wagons were enroute to the Timpanogos (Provo) River where they planned to establish a settlement, the first outside the Valley of the Great Salt Lake. It was March of 1849. Brigham Young had already made his second entrance into the valley by the salten sea after going back to Missouri to assist in bringing more Saints into the wilderness.

The Indian, Angatewats, (for that was his name), who had thrown the buffalo skin into the path of the Mormons waited until the whites were close. He then spoke to Dimick Huntington, scout and interpreter, who was traveling with the pioneers. Huntington assured the Ute that the great Mormon chief had sent these people to live among the reds and that he wanted the two races to be good friends. He vowed that the whites could do much good among the reds.

The brave galloped back to his tribe and the settlers moved forward until they were stopped by a large Ute

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party. The war chief came up for council and Huntington was required to swear by the sun that the Saints would not drive the Indians from their lands or infringe upon their rights. Then the Utes seemed satisfied and agreed to allow the whites to camp on the north side of the Timpanogos River. They called the place "Fort Utah" (later changed it to Provo) after the French trapper, Etienne Provost, of the 1824 era. (Autobiography of George W. Bean, compiled by Flora Diana Bean Horn, Salt Lake City, Utah Printing Co., 1945, pp. 46-47; also *World of Wakara*, Conway B. Sonne, 1962, The Naylor Co., San Antonio, Texas.)

The Indians looked upon the Valley of the Great Salt Lake as a no-man's land between Ute and Shoshone country: But this was different. Now the whites were settling in the best part of Ute territory. This was the place where the Utes met annually to hold councils, to prove athletic prowess and to take fish from the river to supply them for months ahead.

However, the Mormons considered the matter settled and went about the business of building log cabins and planting their crops. They built a stockade around the fort using box elder trees that grew on an island between the channels of the river. By April some forty families were living in the fort and about two hundred and twenty-five acres of land had been planted to grain and corn.

During the summer the whites carefully nurtured the good feeling between the races. Then something happened that erased all that had gone before.

On August 1st, 1849, three of the settlers, Richard A. Ivie, J. Rufus Stoddard and Jerome Zabriskie, met an Indian in a field of corn or grain. The Indian was known as Old Bishop and was well known to the settlers, having often visited them inside the fort.

On this occasion the Indian was wearing a hickory shirt considered to be of value to the settlers. Ivie noticed the shirt and claimed it as his own. The Indian resisted Ivie's

attempt to take it off his back and, in the scuffle, the Indian was accidentally killed.

The white men realized that the death of the Indian would bring severe consequences if it was discovered by the reds so they weighted the body with rocks and threw it into the river. The body was found the following day by Indians who may have been looking for the brave who had not returned to their camp. The Utes surmised that the red had been murdered by the whites and thus began a long period of harrassments of the settlers by the Indians.

In September of 1849, a company of emigrants on their way to the gold fields in California camped along the river. They traded supplies, including guns and ammunition, with the Indians.

The Indians, now equipped with guns and ammunition, began to commit depredations upon the colonists at the fort. They stole corn and grain from the fields and shot arrows at settlers who went up the river for loads of wood.

Occasionally, the settlers fired their cannon to give warning to the Indians that if they continued their provocations they could expect punishment.

During the winter of 1849-50 hostilities were so pronounced that the settlers sent Capt. Peter W. Conover, who was in command of the militia, to solicit military aid from the provisional government of the State of Deseret in Great Salt Lake City.

Governor Brigham Young, not knowing how this would appear to the authorities in Washington, put the matter before Capt. Howard Stansbury who, with his engineers, was making a topographical survey of the territory. Capt. Stansbury, who well knew the conditions of the area, without hesitation recommended military action. He knew of the threats of Big Elk to kill every white man. He believed that these threats should be put to a stop.

Governor Young then sent two companies of fifty men each to the fort on the Provo River. This reinforcement

joined with Capt. Conover's militia and they prepared for battle, taking a position on the south side of the river where an abandoned cabin stood.

The Indians were fortified in a camp along the river about a mile above the fort. They, too, had taken an abandoned cabin suited to their purpose. About 70 warriors were under command of Big Elk.

Just before the fighting began, Dimick Huntington asked for a parley with the Ute chiefs and Stick-in-Head responded to the invitation since he wanted to avoid bloodshed and the likely defeat of his tribe. Big Elk, however, was for war and when he saw that a fight might be averted he ordered the Indians to open fire. The militia fired back and the battle was on.

The two factions fought forcibly for two days with neither side winning. The Indians were well protected by the river bank and the cannon balls sailed harmlessly over their heads. The Utes attacked and then retreated to cover. They would poke their guns through the frozen snow on the bank, raising their heads long enough to aim, and then fire.

Several white men were wounded the first day. One Indian was knocked from a lookout tree and killed.

All next morning the battle raged. Then the whites built a barricade of plants in the shape of a V and placed it on runners. Blankets and buffalo robes were hung loosely inside, stopping the force of the bullets and the outside was concealed by brush and boughs. The barricade sheltered a fairly large number of men who could then fire without being exposed. At the approach of the strange object the Indians were alarmed and retreated. That evening they fired a few shots at the militia and withdrew.

When the militia inspected the battlegrounds the next day they found several warriors dead or dying. They learned that Big Elk (Kone) had been wounded and had died near the mouth of Rock Canyon during the flight. The

militia lost only one man, the son of Joseph Higbee. Some eighteen men had been injured.

Under General Wells the cavalry trailed several Indians south and there were several short forays at Spanish Fork and at Payson. The warriors were overtaken at Table Mountain at the end of Utah Lake and a battle followed in which five Indians were killed and 17 taken prisoner. During the night, the prisoners mutinied, obtained arms and under fire from the troops fled across the ice-covered lake. The cavalry pursued the reds, but with difficulty, for the ice was slippery under the horses' hooves. The Indians sometimes feigned death only to rise and shoot when the whites drew near but the fighting continued until every warrior was dead. The whites lost no men though several horses were injured.

Several days after the battle, fires could be seen near Table Mountain. General Wells sent an investigating party to learn who was camped there. They met several Ute warriors who had discovered the bodies of their tribesmen who were slain there. The warriors, Tabby, Sanpitch, Grosepeen, Antero and Peteetneet, were angry and hostile, demanding to know why their warriors had been killed at Table Mountain and why their bodies had been left there on the ice and snow for two months.

Later, the Indians shared the dinner Interpreter Dimick Huntington's group offered them and they smoked the pipe of peace. Next day, all returned to Fort Utah and the settlers presented them with a large ox which pacified them for the time being. (Sonne, *World of Wakara*, pp. 92-97; *Memories That Live*, pp. 56-57; Gottfredson, *History of Indian Depredations in Utah*; Tullidge's *Quarterly Magazine*, Vol. III, pp. 67-69).